

## In search of teacher excellence: honours programmes and the recognition of teacher excellence in the Netherlands

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the Netherlands, and in many other countries, teacher policy and teacher education are strongly focused on ensuring that teachers meet certain minimum standards. As all student teachers need to meet these standards, teacher education programmes might put the main emphasis on the 'average' student and pay little attention to students who can perform better, which would lead to a middle-of-the-road perspective on teachers and teacher education curricula.

However, there is a growing awareness within higher education of the diversity of students with respect to their abilities and ambitions. In the Netherlands, there are initiatives to develop excellence programmes and honours programmes that recognize and accept student diversity. Such programmes offer 'excellent' students new challenges in the development of their excellence. But as 'excellence' is not centrally defined, higher education institutes can define the concept independently.

Here, we present two examples of teacher education institutes that have developed honours programmes that emphasize excellent student teachers. While traditionally honours programmes in universities are focused on stimulating outstanding research performance of excellent students, in both examples a different focus is taken. The honours programmes in these universities for applied sciences do not focus on academic performance, but focus more directly on the roles of outstanding teachers in schools. One of these institutes focuses on primary teacher roles, the other on secondary teacher roles. Both use research in the content of the honours programmes and in the evaluation of the programmes.

Here, an analysis of the two programmes is related to developments in teacher policy and the teaching profession with respect to teacher excellence, e.g. the recent recommendation from the Netherlands Education Council to nominate the top 5% of teachers as 'excellent teachers' – a recommendation that was received with mixed feelings by teachers, teachers' unions and school leaders.

## CONTEXT

The awareness that teachers play a crucial role in the quality of education systems has stimulated national governments to develop policies aimed at improving the quality of teachers (European Council 2007, 2009; Barber & Mourshed 2007). In many countries, government policies focus on defining and raising minimum standards for and minimum qualifications of teachers. Such policies include explicit descriptions of competence lists and knowledge bases that each teacher needs to master. In this, teacher policy in the Netherlands is no exception: minimum teacher competences are defined by law and laid down in a 21-page document. Additional documents have recently been presented that define the knowledge base that teachers must be able to apply during their professional practice, and national tests that assess students' mastery of this knowledge base are under development.

As all these policies focus on measures that define minimum standards for all teachers, there is a risk that these standards will become the norm and that both student teachers and teacher educators will learn and teach to the minimum norms. This might lead to a middle-of-the-road perspective on teachers and teacher education. This perspective exists in the Netherlands, where teacher education is dominated by modular curricula that do not give students much freedom of choice and where many students try to reach graduation with minimum effort (a minimum pass for each of the modules is sufficient for graduation). Until 2005, there were hardly any honours programmes at Dutch universities for applied sciences (Van Eijl et al., 2005). As a result, students at these universities seem to show little ambition in their study: 43% of students indicated that their motivation decreased during their study, almost 50% reported that they did not feel challenged and 17% performed below their abilities (Van den Broek et al., 2007, Inspectie der Rijksfinanciën, 2010).

In 2005, the Netherlands Ministry of Education supported the start of experiments with selective programmes for excellent students (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen, 2003). Based on an evaluation of the outcomes of these experiments (Korthals et al., 2007), the development of honours programmes entered a second phase – the Sirius programme (named after the brightest star we can see from our planet) – in which the development of university-wide policies and programmes for excellence was stimulated. The aim of this second phase was to widen the experience and the expertise with respect to stimulating and facilitating student excellence. Since 2009, 17 universities have been running honours programmes in Bachelor's courses, while 2010 saw the launch of a parallel programme focusing on Master's programmes. Although the Sirius programme focuses on the entire higher education sector, the question can be raised how this focus on excellence works out for teacher education.

The lack of attention to excellence in teacher education is related to the egalitarian culture in Dutch society and the Dutch school system. What little hierarchy there is in Dutch schools is related to formal organizational structures and to the formal positions of team leaders and school leaders. This leaves little room for informal leadership for teachers or for the recognition of teacher excellence based on their professional qualities and competences. The Netherlands Ministry of Education tries to counter this egalitarian culture in policies aimed at creating room and incentives for teacher excellence. In 2008, salary

levels related to the roles and responsibilities of teachers were introduced (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschappen, 2008). Proposals for performance-related payment were included in the agenda of the new government (VVD/CDA, 2010) but have been postponed due to resistance from teachers and a lack of financial resources. Other initiatives to stimulate excellence within the teaching profession are the introduction of a bursary system to allow teachers to take a Master's degree, the start of a Dutch parallel to the 'Teach First' and 'Teach for America' programmes, and the introduction of double degree programmes for talented students, which combine into one programme a BEd programme for a primary teacher license and a BA programme in educational sciences.

In March 2011, the Netherlands Education Board published a recommendation to nominate within each school the 5% top performing teachers as 'excellent teachers' (Onderwijsraad, 2011), who should be given additional financial rewards as well as extra time to support their colleagues and to involve themselves in innovations within the school. Each school should define its own criteria for selecting these teachers. This recommendation has been met with considerable resistance from teachers, as they fear that it would create inequity and competition between teachers and lead to the arbitrary selection of teachers due to a lack of clear and objective criteria for defining excellence.

In many of these initiatives, reference is made to 'excellent teachers'. However, it is unclear how this 'excellence' is defined and what role teacher education can play in stimulating excellence within initial teacher education. In this paper, we take a closer look at two teacher education institutes and compare the ways in which they define 'teacher excellence' and have designed their honours programmes.

Both institutes are universities of applied sciences that offer teacher education programmes at bachelor level and have recently started developing and implementing 'excellence programmes' for talented students. The Hogeschool Edith Stein (HES) offers teacher education programmes for primary teacher education and Master's programmes in innovation and school leadership, while the School of Education of the Hogeschool van Amsterdam (HvA) offers programmes for primary and secondary education and for pedagogical experts.

In order to compare the two programmes, we analysed them using a framework focused on five aspects of the curriculum, namely: mission, intentions and ambitions; definition of excellence; learning goals and competences; content and structure; and selection and assessment. Based on this comparison, we conclude with possible implications for teacher education as a whole.

## THEORETICAL CONTEXT

To establish the role that teacher education can play in stimulating excellence within initial teacher education, it is necessary to get a clearer understanding of the concept of 'excellence'.

In one approach to teacher excellence, excellence is defined as a relative concept. In this approach, excellence is considered the top of a ranking that ranges from bad through mediocre, regular and good, to excellent. Thus, in order to define excellence, it is necessary to have a clear definition of 'regular' and 'good' teachers. Several studies use this approach and define excellent teachers as those who have all the essential qualities that affect student learning, such as having a good understanding of their subject and the teaching goals, using effective teaching strategies, and creating a safe and challenging learning environment in their classrooms (Barber & Mourshed, 2007, Marzano, 2003, Creemers & Kriakides, 2008, Muijs & Reynolds, 2005). Hattie (2009) identifies five major characteristics of excellent teachers: they can identify the essential representations of their subject, guide learning through classroom interactions, monitor learning and provide feedback, attend to affective attributes, and influence student outcomes. Other studies add such characteristics as engagement with pupils, interest in pupils' lives, enthusiasm and humour (Gennip & Vrieze, 2008, Oomes et al., 2009).

In contrast to focusing on essential qualities that will affect student learning, several studies use a different approach by identifying teachers who are considered excellent. This can be done through a reputational method, whereby teachers and school leaders are asked to nominate colleagues as excellent (Collinson, 1999, 2010), or by selection through special awards like excellent teacher awards or teacher-of-the-year awards (McDowell 2004, Berliner, 2001; McKay, 1997; Van Schaack & Glick 1982). These teachers are either observed (McDowell, 2004; McKay, 1997; Van Schaack & Glick, 1994), interviewed (Collinson, 1999, 2010) or assessed against a given set of features of expertise (Berliner, 2001). The two approaches need to be kept separate, as an analytical assessment of teacher quality and nominations by colleagues do not necessarily lead to the same results (Ellett et al., 1994).

A third approach is employed by Sternberg and Horvath (1994), who use psychological research on expert performance to identify distinctive categories that can define the prototype of an exemplary teacher. In their model, excellent teachers can be distinguished from regular teachers through their content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and practical knowledge; their efficiency, in terms of automatization, executive control (planning, monitoring, evaluating) and reinvestment of cognitive resources; and their insight, in terms of selective encoding, selective combination and selective comparison.

In all three approaches, the emphasis is on the primary role of the teacher, which is to contribute to the learning of students within the context of the classroom. This perspective is rather limited, as in many publications a wider point of view is emphasized, where additional 'content' is introduced for the professional development that is more or less integrated in everyday school practice and envisages a broader spectrum of teachers' functions, which emphasizes their role as members of modern professional organizations along with their teaching role. Here, such concepts as the 'reflective practitioner' or the 'school as a learning organization' are frequently mentioned, and teachers' roles in 'secondary' processes are emphasized. This additional emphasis on secondary roles is also promoted as part of the modernization of the teaching profession. These roles include teachers as researchers, receivers of feedback from colleagues, innovators, active

colleagues and collaborators of principals, and teachers as manifesting what is sometimes called 'teacher leadership' (European Commission 2010: 191).

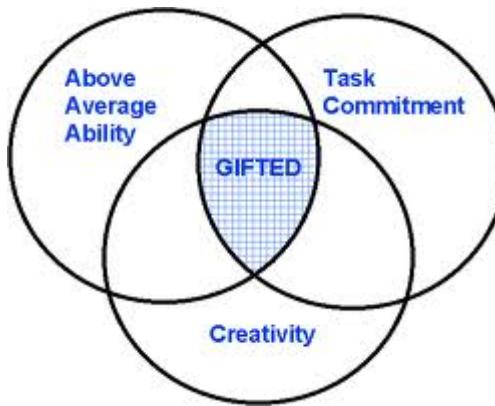
In several countries, secondary roles are emphasized in selection schemes for excellent teachers. One of the criteria applied by the American National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) is the influence that a teacher has on school policy ([http://www.nbpts.org/become\\_a\\_candidate/available\\_certificates1/fields\\_of\\_certification.](http://www.nbpts.org/become_a_candidate/available_certificates1/fields_of_certification.)) To reach the level of advanced skills teacher in England, several competences are taken into account, including taking a leading role in the development and innovation of teaching, using research and evaluation skills, and supporting colleagues (<https://www.education.gov.uk/schools/careers/traininganddevelopment/ast/>). To become an advanced skills teacher, teachers also have to contribute to improving the level of teaching and learning at their own school and at other schools in the region.

The literature shows that the definition of teacher excellence varies according to the method that is used to define excellence and the perspective that is taken on the profession. If teacher education institutes want to contribute to and stimulate teacher excellence, they first need a clear definition of teacher excellence. However, to design programmes that will stimulate excellence, we also have to establish the characteristics of talented and excellent students and elements that characterize a curriculum and a learning environment that stimulates excellence.

Renzulli (1986) defined a model that identifies the three main characteristics of gifted and talented students:

1. Above average ability
2. Creativity
3. Task commitment

According to Renzulli, talent is an interaction between these three characteristics:



**Figure 1:** Renzulli's three ring model (Source: Renzulli, 1978: 182)

Institutes in the USA have a wider experience of honours programmes for talented and gifted students. These programmes are characterized by smaller classes, a stronger engagement of students, a more active role for students, tasks that are more challenging,

teachers who are more stimulating, team teaching of teachers, interdisciplinary approaches, more autonomy for students and more self-responsibility of students (Schuman, 2006). Honours programmes are not so much ‘more of the same’, but mostly ‘different’ from existing programmes (Clark & Zubizarreta, 2008). In the design of such programmes, the focus is on curriculum content that exceeds the regular programme, and on the teaching approach that fits with the aims of the programme and with the aims of the honours students, with a focus on student responsibility, collaboration, multi-disciplinarity and social cohesion (Renzulli & Reist, 2000, Wolfensberger, 2008). The teaching approach should mirror the characteristics of ‘excellent teachers’ that are used in the programme.

With the above in mind, we now take a closer look at two teacher education programmes at Dutch universities for applied sciences that focus on stimulating the excellence of student teachers. In the analysis of the two programmes, we take a closer look at the institutes’ definitions of teacher excellence, the teaching approaches that are used and the congruency between the two.

## THE EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME AT THE HOGESCHOOL VAN AMSTERDAM

### Aim of the programme

The aim of the Hogeschool van Amsterdam (HvA) is to differentiate among a heterogeneous group of students. All students differ in their talents, capabilities, motivations and interests. Highly motivated students are able to assimilate more complex information. This allows them to participate in an additional extra curricular ‘programme of excellence’, in which they are challenged to become teachers who will provide the profession with an extra overall value. The goal of the programme of excellence is to deliver professionals with added value to primary and secondary schools, as they can be teacher leaders in their schools.

The programme of excellence makes a distinction between students who have potential or ‘latent’ talents, and those who have ‘recognized’ talents. As some students come from schools or home environments that did not challenge them to get the most out of themselves, they might have talents they do not recognize and they might not consider themselves talented or have not been recognized as such by their teachers. We call these latent or potential talents. Recognized talents are students who are identified by their teachers as talented and who score significantly better in test results than other students, and who are highly motivated and creative.

### Definition of excellence

The HvA distinguishes three types of excellence within higher professional education: specific excellence (related to the primary role of the professional within his or her profession), generic excellence (related to generic professional skills and attitudes) and excellence with respect to knowledge development (related to involvement in practice-based research). The HvA’s School of Education has chosen to focus its programme of

excellence on generic excellence, which is closely related to the secondary role of teachers discussed above. This type of excellence covers qualities like innovation, creativity, social competence, management, leadership, entrepreneurship, and interdisciplinary and social involvement.

This focus is motivated by the current social debate on the role of education professionals in innovation and quality assurance. To perform such a role, teachers must have a broad spectrum of professionalism. The focus on generic professionalism also created the opportunity to develop a multidisciplinary programme in which students preparing for a career in primary education, in secondary education or at pedagogical institutes can work together. As a result, teacher excellence is defined as:

- showing leadership;
- being entrepreneurial;
- being focused on and involved in the wider environment of education;
- having a research attitude;
- and using a multidisciplinary perspective.

## Content and structure

This extracurricular programme has two parts.

1. A *Studium Excellence* in years 1 and 2. This part of the programme aims at challenging first- and second-year students to discover and identify their latent talents. It comprises lectures by professors, speakers and guest speakers who highlight aspects of the education system that are not covered by the regular programme and give insight into the role of and interrelation between the various qualities that are covered by the definition of teacher excellence. They put education into a wider social perspective. In addition, students are given assignments that lead to concrete products that can be evaluated. The *Studium Excellence* is voluntary and is worth 6 ECTs.
2. An honours programme in years 3 and 4. This programme focuses on recognized talents (students who are considered talented and highly motivated). The programme, therefore, is selective. As a group, the honours students from various course programmes form a community that is multidisciplinary and organized around students who have common ambitions. To strengthen the social coherence and common ambition, the group has a large degree of autonomy in defining the work procedures and locations, which range from lecture and meeting rooms at the university to such public places as libraries, cafés, etc. The students are engaged in extracurricular activities that focus on the five qualities of excellent teachers (15 ECTs). The programme is very open and consists of a variety of activities: lectures, visits and contributions to conferences, assignments, research projects, design projects, etc. The group of honours students have a large degree of responsibility with regard to the content and quality of the programme and products.

## Learning goals and competences

The specific learning objectives for the students were formulated on the basis of the five qualities of generic teacher excellence identified in the definition of teacher excellence within the HvA programme of excellence. These objectives are for the students to:

- Develop entrepreneurial skills. The students should be innovative and creative, dare to take risks by trying new things that have not yet been proven, be focused on solving problems and be ambitious.
- Develop leadership skills. The students should pursue a vision but be open to other views and opinions, be willing to take responsibility and actively contribute to the quality and innovation of their work and of the organization they are part of, and focus on collaboration and the active involvement of others.
- Develop an eye for their environment. The students should be aware of the wider environment of the school, of the effect of the local environment on their work and on the possible effect of their actions on and contribution to the wider environment; feel jointly responsible for the social environment and want to contribute to solving problems in the local environment.
- Focus on interdisciplinary cooperation. The students should recognize that several disciplines are needed to solve complex problems, and understand that the knowledge, opinions, routines and perspectives of other disciplines can enrich their own practice.
- Develop an inquiring attitude. The students should develop the habit of questioning assumptions, addressing uncertainties and asking questions; and focus on improving their own practice through practice-based research and the use of the research outcomes of others.

## Selection and assessment

The focus on the latent talents of students in the first two years of the curriculum implies that there is no selection in years 1 and 2 for the *Studium Excellence*. Anyone who wants to participate in the excellence programme may enrol.

For the honours programme, the focus is on students who have recognized talents and ambitions; that is, they receive higher grades than average and are motivated and creative. These students are recognized and acknowledged by their teachers. To be allowed to enter the honours programme, students have to pass a selective assessment, during which they have to show that they:

1. Possess higher than average skills, evidenced by high grades and the fact that they do not lag behind in the study scheme.
2. Are recognized by other stakeholders, as demonstrated by a letter of recommendation from, for example, a teacher or mentor.
3. Are motivated to engage in activities that require investing extra time in an extracurricular programme, and they express this in a motivation letter.
4. Are creative, and articulate this by stating a vision towards creativity and examples of their own creativity.

Each assessment is administered by the coordinator and a student who is already in the honours programme.

## THE TOP PROGRAMME AT HOGESCHOOL EDITH STEIN

### Aim of the programme

In 2009, Edith Stein Teacher Education College launched a programme for students with special talents: the TOP programme. The aim of the TOP programme is to educate excellent professionals. For students with a high level of talents, motivation, enthusiasm and abilities, Edith Stein offers a high quality programme with ample opportunities to self-directed learning and a keen eye for the demands of the teaching profession.

### Definition of excellence

The metaphor of a rough diamond guides the TOP programme. Polishing this diamond is the aim of the programme. Excellent students at Edith Stein develop their cognitive, social and communication talents into qualities that enable them to function independently and in professional networks. They become excellent classroom teachers and have the potential to become teacher leaders in their schools.

### Learning goals/competences

The TOP programme consists of three phases:

- |               |                         |
|---------------|-------------------------|
| Bachelor      | → excellent teacher     |
| Post-bachelor | → junior teacher leader |
| Master's      | → teacher leader        |

At the end of the bachelor phase, students excel on three dimensions of high quality teaching:

- solid and emphatic personality as a teacher
- sound subject matter knowledge
- adequate and creative in carrying out pedagogical interventions.

After the bachelor phase, the students become junior teacher leaders. This implies that they start to take responsibility for innovation in their elementary schools. They also participate in research groups at Edith Stein. Hence, the innovation projects are backed up with state-of-the-art knowledge and research.

After five years of experience in elementary education, the former excellent students begin a Master's programme to become teacher leaders in their schools. Teacher leaders share knowledge, are role models, and function as initiators and leaders of research-based innovation projects. Edith Stein and the boards of elementary schools in the region

committed themselves to establish such an ambitious development path for highly talented young people who are very motivated to enter the teaching profession.

### **Content and structure of the TOP programme**

Students in the 4-year TOP programme participate in a professional development school programme. This implies that they spend two days a week at a specially qualified elementary school and three days a week at Edith Stein. Ample opportunities for internships are grounded in a concept of expertise in which classroom practice plays a pivotal role. In Loughran's words: learning about practice through practice is crucial for the development of expertise (Loughran 2010: 11). During their days at Edith Stein, students follow, mainly as a separate group, a more condensed form of the regular curriculum. Moreover, Edith Stein is experimenting with methods to provide these students with ways of teaching and learning that are more attuned to their capacities. This involves brief and comprehensive instruction, and ample opportunities to work on challenging tasks and to direct learning according to personal needs. Although self-directed learning is important in this programme, collaboration with peers and professionals in primary schools and at the teacher education college are also pivotal. An international orientation and practice-based research projects complete the bachelor programme for excellent students.

In their junior teacher leader years, there is not much formally organized training. The junior teacher leaders further develop their classroom competences and start to take responsibility for innovation projects. Senior researchers at Edith Stein support them in these efforts. The students keep in touch with Edith Stein through membership of a research group.

In the Master's programme, the prospective teacher leaders start formal education again. They spend one day a week attending lectures and participating in other activities in Edith Stein's Learning & Innovation Master's programme. This professional programme is built around research-based activities and projects in the teachers' schools. Courses on learning psychology, learning environments, innovation and research methods support these activities and projects. Students also receive a sound training in communicative skills, which are very important to effectively serve as a teacher leader.

### **Selection and assessment**

Various instruments are used to select students for the TOP programme. Their intellectual skills and their knowledge of elementary school subjects are assessed by standard paper and pencil tests. In order to gain an insight into their ambitions, the students write motivation letters and they are interviewed in order to establish their communicative skills and emotional stability. Cognitive abilities, communicative skills and passion for the teaching profession are important selection criteria.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this paper we raised the question what role teacher education can play in stimulating teacher excellence within initial teacher education. We can give only a limited answer to this question, as we looked at just two cases from a specific context: excellence programmes in teacher education in the Netherlands. As both programmes started less than two years ago, we could only present information on the intended curriculum and partly on the implemented curriculum, but as there are no graduated students yet, no information is available on the attained curriculum and in its impact on students. However, by comparing the two cases we can identify a number of elements that seem important in stimulating teacher excellence.

The comparison of the two programmes shows that the definition of teacher excellence and the focus of the two programmes differ considerably, reflecting the various definitions that can be found in the literature. The HES programme starts with a focus on teacher qualities that are closely related to the primary role of the teacher (subject knowledge and pedagogical and didactic intervention skills). After graduation, the emphasis is more on a secondary role, namely that of teacher leadership. The HvA's main focus is on the secondary role of the teacher (the teacher as a leader, entrepreneur, researcher, partner for professionals in other disciplines and part of the wider environment). Both choices are legitimate in themselves and in both cases the focus is not absolute, as the primary and the secondary role cannot be separated from each other. Therefore, the three types of excellence that are distinguished within the HvA are not mutually exclusive, but nevertheless provide a useful frame of reference for teacher education institutes that want to design excellence programmes and have to decide on the focus of such programmes.

The TOP programme at the HES is interesting in that it places the excellence programme in the wider perspective of lifelong learning. In this view, initial teacher education cannot be considered in isolation: the development of teacher expertise and excellence needs to be placed in a continuum of initial teacher education, teacher induction and continuous professional development. In this continuum, the HES recognizes that initial teacher education cannot prepare for excellence, as this will develop only in close interaction with experience. Excellence programmes in initial teacher education can only help talented and ambitious students to develop their talents; after graduation, they are still novice teachers. The HES also recognizes that experience in itself will not lead to excellence. To develop excellence, this experience should take the form of deliberate practice supported by guided reflection (Berliner, 2004). The TOP programme supports this guided reflection by making a close connection between school and teacher education institutes and through the participation of talented teachers in research groups at HES.

Both programmes use similar ways of selecting students for their excellence programmes. Here, academic performance, creativity, ambition, motivation and passion are key elements. These are assessed with a variety of instruments (regular study results, motivation letters and letters of recommendation). The HvA recognizes that within the Netherlands' egalitarian culture it is not done to consider oneself excellent. It also recognizes that many students from disadvantaged backgrounds are often not challenged to consider themselves talented, either at home or in school. Therefore, without further support a process of self-selection will lead to disregarding a large group of potentially talented students who are not aware of their talents. The concept of latent talents strengthens the awareness that teacher

educators have a great responsibility in identifying potentially talented students and in creating contexts that help students to discover their talents and ambitions. When students come from school contexts in which the minimum was the standard, a change in attitude cannot be taken for granted and teacher education institutes have to create opportunities that can show students that it is rewarding and stimulating to do more than necessary, to foster their curiosity and to discover new territories.

With respect to the didactic approach and the characteristics of the learning environments, both institutes focus on student responsibility within a collaborative context. This strengthens the involvement and engagement of students and the social cohesion of the excellence groups. The level of multi-disciplinarity is limited, as neither programme extends beyond its school of education. The level at the HvA is a little higher than at the HES, as students preparing for a career in secondary education or at pedagogical institutes are also included in the programme, but what multi-disciplinarity there is, is still limited to the education sector. It would be worthwhile to develop programmes that include students from other sectors, as this would contribute to opening up the educational sector.

The responsibility of the students applies not only to the design of the programme, but also to the assessments, both in terms of the assessment criteria and in terms of the self-assessment of performances and student products. This closely mirrors another characteristic of teacher excellence that neither institute has mentioned explicitly: quality awareness.

## CONCLUSION

Several initiatives have been implemented in the Netherlands to change the egalitarian middle-of-the-road culture within the education system. The two examples of excellence programmes in teacher education are good examples of such initiatives. However, as the initiatives are still very recent, no evidence can be given here of the impact of the programmes on either the students or the schools. Nevertheless, we do see four areas of impact:

1. Impact on the students: the excellence programmes provide talented students with a challenging learning environment that keeps them motivated to finish their studies and to make a deliberate choice to enter a profession that is challenging and rewarding for talented and ambitious young people. Without such programmes, talented students would tend not to consider the teaching profession as a future career, as teaching would not challenge their talents and ambitions sufficiently. This would be a waste, as pupils, schools and society as a whole have a strong need for talent and ambitions.
2. Impact on teacher education: we believe that a stronger focus on the talents of students and on challenging students to get the most out of their studies, might help to create a more ambitious culture within teacher education. Through a stronger awareness of the capabilities and ambitions of students, we hope to contribute to a more challenging learning environment within teacher education as a whole, with a change of focus from

minimum requirements to getting the most out of every student. New, challenging teaching approaches can be tested within the excellence programmes and then implemented within the regular programmes. Excellence programmes might also lead to an increase in the quality of the students who choose to enter the teaching profession, as excellence programmes can make teacher education programmes more attractive to talented students.

3. Impact on schools: schools get access to highly motivated and talented students who are willing to make a difference in schools and to take responsibility and leadership in that. However, this requires the careful attention of school leaders. The dominant culture in many schools leaves little room to recognize the individual excellence of teachers. Research on the position of teachers who have increased their excellence through a Master's course shows that teachers engaged in a Master's programme can encounter considerable barriers within the organizational culture of the school. They need to overcome these barriers if they want to earn recognition outside the formal hierarchy of the school (Snoek, 2011). The same might happen when talented honours students finish their study and start working in schools. If their qualities, talents and ambitions are not recognized in school and they are not challenged to use these qualities in their school, the risk is that they will switch careers and thus leave the teaching profession full of frustration.
4. Impact on the teaching profession as a whole: honours students can contribute to a new dynamic in the teaching profession, especially if the excellence programme is integrated in a perspective of lifelong learning, as at HES. Teacher leadership, teacher excellence and an inquiring attitude of teachers can become an accepted perspective within the profession.

To create this impact on the educational system, we need a multilevel approach whereby various stakeholders – for example, government, school leaders, teachers, initial teacher education, providers for CPD and teacher unions – collaborate towards the same goal and create coherence in systems for teacher learning, recognition, rewards systems, non-financial incentives, leadership strategies and self-regulation by teachers.

Teacher policies, teacher education curricula and quality procedures, and human resource strategies in schools should focus on stimulating excellence and ambition within the profession, recognizing the key elements of a challenging learning and working environment that fosters excellence, namely responsibility, collaboration, multi-disciplinarity and social cohesion.

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